

# The Effectiveness of Art Therapy for Depression and Relevant Factors

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**Abstract.** Art therapy (AT) is a method of treating psychological illnesses and improving mental health that uses artistic means. Depression is a medical condition that could cause changes in one's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. This paper focuses on testing the effectiveness of art therapy on depressive symptoms with its relevant factors by analyzing the most recent research progress in this field. With the evaluation of the paper, it can be concluded that depression symptoms can be reduced by art therapy. However, there are some limitations in the research reviewed in this article. Most research used subjective measures, which might not reflect the objective outcomes of participants. Additionally, most studies did not follow participants for a long period after the therapy. Future research could be done with more objective methods and procedures to test the long-term effect of art therapy on depression. This review can provide some suggestions to the development of effective treatments for individuals with depression.

**Keywords:** art therapy; depression; emotion.

## 1. Introduction

Art therapy (AT) acts as a method to treat psychological illnesses and improving mental healthiness that use artistic means. It began in the 1940s, when doctors realized that people suffering from mental illnesses frequently employed drawings and artwork as a kind of therapy. Art has now become an important aspect of the therapeutic realm, being employed in diagnostic and treatment procedures. In a specific study, it investigates the flow experience, a psychological condition associated with increased creativity and well-being. It addresses the implications for art therapy and indicates that art therapists can assist individuals in entering and maintaining a flow state while creating art. The study draws on a variety of sources to provide a thorough knowledge of the relationship between flow, creativity, and well-being in the context of art therapy [1]. Flow has a longer lasting positive impact on well-being than temporary happiness and pleasure. It contributes to the development of emotional capital for the future and improves life engagement. Positive emotions felt during flow can contribute to the expansion and development of personal resources. Executive functioning is controlled by the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, which integrates emotional, sensory, and cognitive information into self-reflective consciousness. To illustrate the principles covered, the paper also uses examples from the author's personal art therapy practice [1].

On the other hand, major depressive disorder (MDD), also commonly called “depression”, is a psychological health illness defined by symptoms of chronic melancholy, lack of willingness or enjoyment in events, and some other characteristics such as insomnia, fatigue, and feelings of worthlessness or guilt [2]. These can lead to mental and physical difficulties. A depression diagnosis needs at least two weeks of symptoms and a change in previous functioning. To avoid misdiagnosis, it is critical to rule out general medical explanations. It affects a sizable proportion of the population. MDD affects women more than males, and its progression is impacted by both hereditary and environmental factors, including childhood trauma. The existence of depressive symptoms for at least two weeks is required for the diagnosis of MDD. For treatment-resistant instances, counseling, pharmaceutical treatments, and electroconvulsive therapy are available. Several therapeutic techniques, including behavioral activation and cognitive-behavioral therapy, were shown for their benefits in the treatment of MDD [2].



One important study discovered that participating in art therapy dramatically reduced depressive symptoms and boosted general well-being in participants. Art therapy's creative process can give a therapeutic channel for people to express and explore their emotions. Another intriguing study looked at the use of clay in art therapy for people suffering from depression. Working with clay helped participants achieve a sense of control and self-expression, which led to a decrease of depression symptoms, according to this study. While these studies give useful information, it is vital to remember that art therapy cannot be used in isolation to alleviate depression. As part of a comprehensive treatment plan, it is generally utilized in conjunction with other therapeutic modalities such as counseling or medicine. Moreover, a lack of adequate symptoms of depression was carried out. Thus, this review is going to demonstrate studies that are related to this gap and discuss them in respect of overall efficacy of AT for depression and the role of emotion processing and self-esteem.

## **2. Impact of AT for Depression and Underlying Mechanism**

### **2.1. Overall Efficacy of AT for Depression**

Overall, studies claimed the effectiveness of art therapy over depression. For instance, a study published in the desire to explore the impacts of art psychotherapy in the respect to participants with moderate-to-severe MDD when combined with continuous pharmacotherapy [3]. These participants had been assigned at random and separated into two independent groups— experimental group which got art psychotherapy on top of medication, or comparison group that got only pharmacotherapy. The experimental group received art psychotherapy together with medication, while the comparison group received only pharmacotherapy. The effects of the therapies are assessed. This result suggests in consideration of MDD in the extent between moderate to severe, individuals treated with both therapies exhibited somewhat higher recovery compared to individuals treated with pharmacotherapy alone. The study does, however, suggest that a more rigorous test is required to better evaluate art psychotherapy's efficacy as an adjunct technique for the treatment of MDD [3].

Another study found art therapy would be beneficial for the patient. This study's research goal was to determine whether when used in conjunction with other therapies, art therapy helps older women with depression. [4]. The study included an elderly woman MDD who was continually taking medication. The experimental group included women who underwent sessions for art therapy, whereas the comparison group received no adjuvant intervention. With random assignment, the experiment was a single-blind trial of elder female with MDD who were continually taking medication. The experimental group comprised of 31 women who attended 20 weekly 90-minute art therapy sessions. The control group received no adjuvant treatment. Different tests were used to assess patients at baseline and after 20 weeks, measuring their depression symptoms as well as anxiety symptoms. Women within experimental group performed much better on multiple tests than women within comparison group. There was no large disparity in cognitive assessments between groups. Overall, the study discovered that using art therapy for MDD in older women can alleviate depression symptoms [4]. Results of the above two studies indicate that depressive symptoms can be reduced acting as an effect of art therapy.

### **2.2. The Role of Emotion Processing and Self-Esteem**

Emotion processing as well as self-esteem can be seen as two of the main depressive symptoms. The first study here desired to test the impact of clay art therapy (CAT) for major MDD patients that are adult [5]. Participants were randomly assigned into 2 groups: one using visual art therapy (VA) and the other using CAT. The researchers measured the impact of CAT. The result is determined to compare how VA and CAT have different impact on health, well-being, and depressive signs. A follow-up session was also held 3 weeks after the experiment to see the long-term impact of CAT. As they discovered as the result, CAT would have more significant impact on health, well-being, and depressive signs. It shows better regulation of emotions and mental health. Nevertheless, CAT's long-

term impacts would be difficult to determine just by 3 weeks of follow-up. Thus, this study shows potential CAT impact on treating depression [5].

The next study wants to evaluate the impact of using art as a medium to communicate emotions on chosen Education Students from the Bulacan State University-Bustos Campus [6]. The study employed a mixed-method research approach, with participants drawn from a pool of undergraduates. The researchers measured the amount of depression among the students and collected scores. Participants were asked to rate how much they agreed with the art therapy sessions and how much they disagreed with using art as a means to convey emotions. The participants were asked to score their happiness with the art therapy sessions after the researchers distributed questionnaires to randomly selected students. The information was then tallied in order to validate and assess the students' satisfaction with the services. The study discovered a substantial difference in the students' emotional states before and after the administration of personalized art therapy [6].

The next two study's research question was to compare the effects of manual-based Phenomenological Art Therapy (PATd) in addition to therapy as usual (TAU) for people living with depression to just TAU for people that have moderate and severe level of depression [7]. The primary objectives were to evaluate how much levels of self-esteem and depression, with additional information about suicidal ideation and sickness absence. When compared to the TAU group, the experimental group demonstrated a large decline in levels for depression. Self-esteem improved significantly in both groups. When compared to the TAU group, the experimental group had a higher rate of returning to work. However, there was no statistically significant effect on suicidal ideation. The study indicated that manual-based PATd is a successful treatment for people suffering from moderate to severe depression, but more research is needed to validate these findings and investigate its long-term implications [7].

The purpose of this next study is to see if the gains seen immediately after completing PATd were sustained six months later in terms of mainly depression, self-esteem [8]. It served as a follow-up for the last study that was discussed. When compared to the control group, the intervention group demonstrated a faster fall in depression and a substantial reduction in depression. Gender and comorbidities, for example, were important predictors of the result. Both groups experienced significant increases in self-esteem, reduced sick leave, and reduced suicidal ideation. Another study included elderly persons from two nursing homes in southern Taiwan who were randomly allocated to one of two groups: intervention or control [9] This study's goal is to find out how art therapy affects nursing home residents' levels of sadness and self-esteem. AT was used in the intervention group, which entailed creating workmanship using various media and techniques. The participants were instructed to build patterns using their eyes, hands, and cognition to show their personality. The art therapy group program sought to boost confidence, investigate self-awareness, and conduct life assessments. The study discovered that the art therapy intervention increased participants' confidence and self-worth, and that the intervention group was helpful in enhancing their self-esteem. Cardiovascular diseases were the most prevalent chronic condition among patients, which made up the majority. In terms of pre-test mental functioning, self-care skills, physical activity, depression, or self-esteem, there was no discernible difference between the two groups [9]. The intervention group showed a significant reduction in depressive symptoms and an increase in self-esteem compared to the control group.

### **3. Essential Elements of AT**

The purpose of this study was to investigate what art therapy specialists regard to be the most important parts of treating patients with depression in clinical practice [10]. The Delphi technique was used to collect expert opinions on the most important components of art therapy in clinical practice. The study included 28 occupational therapists who had at least five years of experience utilizing art therapy with depressed patients. In multiple rounds, the experts were asked to rank their agreement with allegations given in a questionnaire. After three rounds, 48 statements had a 70% or

greater degree of agreement. Patients can express themselves verbally and nonverbally through art therapy, which addresses their melancholy ideas, feelings, and physical symptoms. Although there are divergent findings in regard to communication and therapeutic practice, experts generally agree on the value of communicating thoughts, feelings, and life experiences. As manual-based art therapy may not be useful in treating depression, experts are divided on its usage [10]. There is a disagreement on the objective of enhancing daily functioning, and further study is required to comprehend the effects of various theoretical frames of reference on art therapy.

#### 4. Conclusion

Relatively to the research papers, self-confidence, and self-esteem was significantly increased after art therapy. This symbolizes the effectiveness of art therapy upon depression symptoms. With the analyses of the overall effect of art therapy, the results suggest that art therapy successfully reduces the depressive symptoms associated with depression. In particular to self-esteem, it had a positive effect as the application of art therapy. It increased emotional well-being, self-efficacy, social connections, mindfulness, as well as quality of life. Thus, these results indicate that in the short-term, art therapy promoted the reduction of depression. In the long-term, studies had suggested that people did increase their confidence and reduced their sick scenarios. Some limitations involved in the process included the lack of time period to measure the long-term effects of art therapy. In the future, research should focus on establishing long-term effects of art therapy. Another limitation is that self-rated questionnaires were used to measure the outcomes in most of the reviewed research. On top of these limitations, future studies can focus on how art therapy can affect other disorders, such as anxiety. With the analysis of various papers, it would be helpful for researchers to look into how art therapy works in different scenarios.

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